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Yemen's Arab Spring

Outsmarting the Cunning State?

Elham Manea

Introduction

It is difficult to set a date for the start of Yemen's Arab Spring. The conflicting recollections of various participants reveal a great deal about the context within which the youth uprising took place, a context marked by tribal, regional and sectarian identities. It is precisely this political landscape – a Yemeni state that was created in 1990 out of the unification of North and South Yemen – that differentiates its uprising from its counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt.

In this chapter I argue that while the grievances of Yemeni youth arise from similar roots to those of Tunisian and Egyptian youth, the context within which this revolt took place was simply different. It was shaped by the politics of what I call the *cunning state*: a state run by ethnic core elites, who exploit the seams of international structures and capitalize on the fear of the international community over its perceived failure to perpetuate its grip on power.

In this chapter, I will first narrate several different recollections of how the Yemeni Arab Spring began. I will then move to explain the similarities between the grievances of youth in Yemen, on the one hand, and in Tunisia and Egypt, on the other. In the following section I will highlight the differences that set Yemen apart from the other two countries and then describe the features of the cunning Yemeni state. These features make it clear why it was not quite possible to fulfil young Yemenis' hopes for an end to the regime of former President Saleh.

The spark?

Ask people the starting date of Yemen's youth revolt, and you may be surprised by how conflicting their recollections will be.

Some, mainly youth and student activists, set the date in mid-January 2011, precisely one day after 14 January, when Tunisian President Bin Ali fled his country. That was the spark, they will say. Wameedh Mohammad Shakir, a leading female activist and human rights campaigner, explained to me that on the night when Bin Ali fled Tunisia,

she and some colleagues organized a demonstration in front of the French Embassy in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen: 'We wanted to tell them, take your hands off the Arab world's democracy.' It was a small demonstration, she said. 'A day later a huge demonstration started out of Sana'a University.'

Her account was supported by that of Tawakkol Karman, the human rights activist and joint winner of the Nobel peace prize, in her 28 April comment for the *Guardian*. She said that on 15 February a group of students from Sana'a University asked her to attend a vigil in front of the Tunisian embassy: 'The demonstration was astonishing; thousands turned up, and Sana'a witnessed its first peaceful demonstration for the overthrow of the regime!'

Others would set the date instead on 3 February, when the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of six opposition parties which was part of the political establishment, decided to join ranks with the youth and demand 'reform' of the system (Elsyasi.com 2011).

The participation of the JMP would take a different turn after 20 February, when they called on their supporters to 'unite with the youth protesters and the masses of people in their protest activities, which reject the continuation of oppression, despotism, and corruption' (Al Jazeera 2011). Instead of 'reform', they started to use the Arab Spring's term 'leave', which called on Arab despots to step down from office.

Still other young people would insist that 11 February is *the* decisive date of the Yemeni 'revolution'. That was the date when Hosni Mubarak announced his resignation. In their celebrations, some students organized the first sit-in strike in Taiz, the most populous and fertile part of Yemen: 'We went first to the Tahrir Square and we were beaten [by security forces] and we had to move to Jamal Street and finally we withdraw to the Freedom Square. It was the first sit-in demonstration in the whole republic', Hisham Elribati, the coordinator of the Independent Youth of 11 February Revolution, explained to me later. Other youth and civil society activists organized demonstrations in Sana'a on the same day as well, but the main issue here is their affiliation with Taiz, the location of the largest Sunni governorate.

This youth movement insists on being 'independent'. They are 'sick' of the politics of political parties and were and still are 'afraid that it will interfere in the revolution and direct it towards partisan interests', as Elribati put it. Interestingly, its position was translated into one of the most popular slogans of the Yemeni youth revolt: 'No Partisan, no parties. Our revolution is a youth revolution.' Notwithstanding their slogan, it is difficult not to notice a leftist ideological streak in their statement.

Finally, yet another youth group would set the date as 16 February. Mohammad Ali Shaen died that day, the first protester to die in the Yemeni uprising. This group, the 16 February Peaceful Youth Revolution, is based in the southern part of Yemen, specifically the Aden governorate. Indeed, its main feature is its southern nature. Initially it was not politically affiliated with the Southern Movement known as *al-Hirak*, a loose affiliation of regional opposition organizations and activists in the southern provinces, which calls for an end to northern hegemony. In fact, Aden has often been a challenge for the Southern Movement: while it did not support the northern regime, it persistently refrained from joining al-Hirak. However, al-Hirak began to compete with the Islamist Islah Party, the strongest party in the JMP, to control this youth group. The two groups agreed on a ban on holding any flags, either the Unified Yemen flag or the Southern flag, during demonstrations. It was only after members of the old regime turned against Saleh at the end of March that al-Hirak was in a position to win

the 16 February youth group over to its side: 'the revolution, it was said, was hijacked. It was not a revolution any more. It became part of the old political system', Sami Ghaleb, editor-in-chief of the *Al Nedaa* newspaper, told me. Since then, in its protests and sit-in strikes, the group has specifically called for 'southern' demands.

Obviously, these conflicting dates reflect Yemen's complicated political landscape. Yet, regardless of which date sparked the revolt, one thing is clear. By 28 February 2011, the call for Saleh to step down had turned city squares into melting pots that managed to unify different groups that otherwise stood at odds to each other.

Same goal, same grievances, revolt expected!

If setting a date for the start of the Yemeni youth revolt is confusing enough, the goal of the revolt seemed to be clear, at least for the youth groups: 'Leave!' This one word captured the core of their demands. The country's dire conditions resulted from the politics of President Ali Abduallah Saleh and he should therefore step down. Young people I spoke to in Taghier Square in Sana'a on 28 February were sure about this much. They were convinced that 'when he steps down, things will be better' (Manea 2011c). And what would happen after that? That question seemed to startle them.

The slogans of the Yemeni youth were similar to those of their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts. 'Leave' was the best known, but various posters called for 'employment', an end to 'patronage', a 'just state', 'accountability', and an end to the 'control of Saleh's family'.

Their demands were hardly surprising. Just like their Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts, young protesters in Yemen were demanding a future and a perspective in their own country. They wanted a country to call 'their own'. Of course, one can argue that the magnitude of poverty and problems in Yemen was not comparable to those in Egypt and Tunisia. But the roots are similar. With unemployment conservatively estimated at 35 per cent, more than 45 per cent of people living under the poverty line, 30 per cent of citizens without basic food security, and corruption permeating every level of the state's institutions, the revolt was hardly surprising.

Nevertheless, the issues that set the revolt in motion were not only economic in nature. Just like their Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts, the young Yemenis were disgusted by a 'pluralistic system' that resulted in neither accountability nor real alternation of power. All three Arab regimes seemed to follow to the letter the strategy of *controlled liberalization,* as defined by Daniel Brumberg (2003: 6, cited by Yom 2005: 23): 'a method by which governments give "opposition groups a way to blow off steam. The steam valve must meet opponents' minimal expectation of political openness ... but prevent them from undermining the regime's ultimate control."'

In other words, all three countries had adopted the shell of a democratic legal organizational dimension, which calls for the 'legal existence of political parties and interest groups, and their integration into a constitutional legal order' (Leca 1994: 49). Conspicuously absent from their systems, however, was what Leca calls the normative dimension of a democratic system, 'the core of which is pluralism, where no single group or party enjoys a monopoly on the political truth. Pluralism thus entails tolerance, acceptance of majority rule, limited government, and protection of basic rights' (Leca 1994: 49).

The Yemeni political system certainly has similar features of this 'democratic shell', coloured as it may be by a specific local authenticity. Political parties were allowed to

work freely, and the Yemeni press was providing both critique and platforms for debates that made their counterparts in the Arabian Peninsula blush with envy. Meanwhile, the electoral system, with its bicameral legislature, allowed for some features of representative democracy, especially as voters have often been keen on exercising their right to select their lawmakers in every election to the House of Representatives.[1]

This ability to exercise features of a representative democracy was expressed in the report of the European Union Election Observation Mission (2006) on Yemen's 2006 presidential and local elections. They portrayed the elections as 'an openly-contested electoral process ... that represented a milestone in the democratic development in Yemen'. Indeed, they said:

> The elections benefited from the full engagement of all major political parties and were notable for the degree of freedom enjoyed by all candidates to assemble and to express their views so that, for the first time in the political history of both Yemen and the region, an incumbent faced a real challenge at the polls.
>
> *(European Union Election Observation Mission 2006: 1)*

An active and open electoral process notwithstanding, Yemen's political and administrative structures had fundamental and systemic weaknesses that undermined the democratic nature of key aspects of the electoral process. The same European Mission report was clear about these shortcomings: 'the results process lacked credibility to the extent that it was not possible to have confidence in the accuracy of the final results, State resources were used unfairly by incumbents and women were comprehensively excluded from the process' (European Union Election Observation Mission 2006).

Most importantly, the president who competed with others in 2006 had, in fact, held that office since 1978. Constitutional legitimacy was made a farce through what I term the *unofficial sphere of politics*: 'a sphere were decisions are made that bypass the law and the constitution, sometimes with the specific aim of rendering more shallow the state's institutional reality' (Manea 2011a: 87). This phenomenon has allowed Saleh to change a law with a telephone call. It also allowed him and his closed net of core elites to change articles in the constitution with an ease that was staggering. This point was made even clearer by his former ally Sheikh Sadeq Abduallah al-Ahmar, the paramount sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation, who stated in a television interview, 'We have a constitution that we turned into a duck game, every day changing five or ten of its articles' (interview with Sadeq al-Ahmar, 1 April 2011).

These fundamental flaws were not lost on young, educated Yemeni men and women. They had enough of this type of politics. Their revolt, while expected, took the political establishment and opposition parties and movements by surprise.

Different context!

The similarities between the Yemeni and Tunisian and Egyptian revolts end here. Indeed, while the roots of the young Yemenis' grievances were similar to those of their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts, the context within which they were operating was fundamentally different. This is the primary factor that sets Yemen apart from the other two countries.

In fact, one can argue that Yemen and the other two countries belong to two different sets of countries, based on the age of their states:

1 Countries of old states and old societies are characterized by a long tradition of a centralized state apparatus and the existence of a strong national identity. This group includes Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, to a lesser extent.
2 Countries of new states and old societies are characterized by the newness of their states, and by the lack of a solid national identity, and the division of society along tribal, religious sectarian, linguistic and/or regional lines. Yemen, Syria and Libya belong to this category.[2]

The differences in the types of states are, of course, reflected in the types of challenges they face. In the first category, apart from the economic challenges, the issues at stake are connected with dismantling an authoritarian executive power, and strengthening the state's institutions and the separation of powers. In the second category, the context is volatile and marred by fear of civil war. The challenges therefore are inherently connected to building state institutions and keeping the state intact and unified.

A second line of differentiation between the contexts of Yemen, on the one hand, and Tunisia and Egypt, on the other, relates to the nature of their core political elites. For example, compare the composition of the political elites in Yemen and in Egypt, and the main difference between the two becomes clear: the core elites in Yemen tend to be members of an ethnic group (sectarian tribal), whereas those in Egypt are more diversified and less restricted by ethnic considerations. In fact, although Egypt's political system is highly centralized and authoritarian, the members of the ruling elite often come from different social backgrounds, and the criteria by which they are chosen have more to do with their party affiliation, education, military background, personal relationships and patron–client relations. This difference has shaped the outcome in the two countries and helps to explain why it was possible for the Egyptian army leaders to push Mubarak to leave his position. They were not members of the same clan or the same family, whose survival depends on his survival. He was simply one person – and he can be replaced.

The third, and most important, line of differentiation that sets Yemen apart from Tunisia and Egypt is that Yemen can be described as a 'cunning state'. The features of the 'cunning state' have shaped to a great extent the outcome of the Yemeni revolt and the solutions suggested by the international community. This concept is worth considering in some detail.

Yemen's cunning state

The term 'cunning state' as used by Shaini Randeria (2003: 4) to refer to states 'which capitalize on their perceived weakness in order to render themselves unaccountable both to their citizens and to international institutions'.

Modifying it to fit the Yemeni context, I define the term as *a state run by ethnic core elites, who exploit the seams of international structures and capitalize on the fear of the international community over its perceived failure to perpetuate its grip on power.* Yemen's cunning state is run by ethnic core elites, who play on the ethnic divisions within their own society; it functions according to a certain pattern of politics and survives through the fears of its own citizens and the international community. Three features of the Yemeni cunning state are worth describing, as follows:

First feature: A state run by ethnic core elites, who exploit the divisions in their own society

The regime that has controlled Yemen since 1978 is ethnic in nature. It has depended on the support and loyalty of a close network within its own sectarian and tribal group, at the same time playing on the sectarian, tribal and regional divisions within society. This exploitation of the ethnic divisions within Yemen has led to a constantly shifting interplay in which various political and ethnic groups are included at the expense of others at one point, only to be excluded at another point.

More specifically, two circles of power can be identified. The first, the inner circle of the core elites, includes immediate clan members and the larger tribal groups:

1 Immediate clan members. The clan that runs Yemen is the Sanhan tribe, based in the south–southeast corner of Sana'a, the capital. When Saleh, the former president, came to power in 1978, he systematically appointed close relatives and members of his tribe to key command positions, thus ensuring the loyalty of the army and the security apparatus. His clan's grip on those two institutions continued after the civil war of 1994, which resolved the power struggle in unified Yemen in his favour.

   This grip of the tribe continues today, even after he has stepped down. I will return to this point later. Suffice it to say at this point that rivalry and competition have characterized the relationships between Saleh's immediate clan members. In other words, relying on the inner circle of the clan is not the same as trusting them. The power struggle between Saleh and his half-brother Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the commander of the First Armoured Division of the army, is but one example. Since 2000 Ali Mohsen has been seen as an obstacle to a smooth transition of power to Saleh's son Ahmed. The struggle turned to open hostility in 2011 when Mohsen decided to support the youth uprising in 2011 (Manea 2009).
2 The larger sectarian tribal group that Saleh has depended on is the Zaydi Hashid tribal confederation. It has ensured his survival during critical political upheavals, including the Sadaa civil war that started in 2004 and the civil war of 1994 when Hashid tribesmen were a pivotal part of the coalition that ensured Saleh's victory against the southern troops.

Again, interdependence between the two groups does not guarantee harmonious relationships. Often their ties feature multiple ups and downs and sometimes bitter rivalry that can border on open confrontation. One example was the power struggle between Saleh and the late paramount sheikh of the Hashid confederation, Abduallah al-Ahmar. This rivalry became open after his death, when his sons supported the youth uprising in February 2011.[3]

The second, wider, circle of the power base includes other alliances.

The resilience of the Yemeni political system, and its survival despite continuous crises, can be attributed to the core elites' dependence on traditional client-based alliances. At the core of this strategy is a Machiavellian strategy of divide and rule, which constantly adjusts and changes its alliances as the sands of Yemeni politics shift.

Yemen's core elites often make their alliances with members of social groups within the wider circle of their traditional base of power. This circle includes 'those religious, sectarian, tribal, or regional groups which are marginalized, discriminated against, or feel threatened within the larger system, or simply aspire to be part of the political

system and gain some of its spoils' (Manea 2011a: 122). This circle has proved vital for the elites' politics of survival: it has often played on the sense of victimization, fear or ambition among these social groups, and then played them against other competing political powers or against each other. This strategy has one clear purpose: to weaken competing political groups that prove threatening to their authority.

Sometimes alliances include tribal confederations, such as the Bakil, known historically to be at odds with the Hashid confederation. Other times they include members and groups of the Sunni middle region (*al-manateq al wousta*), who have often resented the Zaydi tribe's control of power. At one point the Saleh regime engaged with the Zaydi Huthi movement – which later launched a rebellion against Saleh in the northern city of Sadaa. Saleh showered the movement with money and privileges and encouraged it to propagate its own line of faith through preaching and schools. At the time, Saleh was trying to counter the growing influence of his former ally, the Sunni Islamist Islah Party.

Most significantly, alliances within the wider circle of power have included dissatisfied southern groups. Among them are army commanders and political figures, mainly from the southern regions of Abien and Shabwa, who were defeated in the 1986 southern civil war and later fled to the north and were allowed to reorganize their defeated army brigades in what was later called the Brigades of Unity. These brigades were instrumental in supporting Saleh in the 1994 civil war. The new President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who came to power in February 2012 as part of the Gulf Initiative provisions, and his defence minister belong to this group.

While this complicated web of alliances and ties may seem confusing, one key point should be emphasized here: the survival and resilience of Yemen's cunning state can be attributed to its exploitation of the divisions within its own society. In other words, Yemeni social divisions along tribal, regional and sectarian lines have, in fact, been accentuated and strengthened by the Yemeni leadership itself.

Second feature: A state that is constantly engaged in the politics of survival

Survival has been the main concern of the Yemeni ethnic core elites. The word 'survival' here means the need of the ruling elites to undertake whatever is necessary to keep their hold on power and to survive in the moving sands of Yemeni politics. I use the term here to indicate core elites' 'shifting alliances with various political and social groups and their allocation and channeling of resources to these groups to ensure their hold on power and to survive in a hostile political environment' (Manea 2011a: 108). The Yemeni core elites juggle a collection of different and sometimes competing interests, and simultaneously direct these strategies to the ultimate aim of this politics: staying in power. It should be emphasized here that this feature is not unique to Yemen; it is common among Arab authoritarian regimes.

In addition to the regime's shifting alliances, it uses two other strategies for survival:

1 It takes advantage of the phenomenon of political Islam. Here the core elites endorse certain Islamist groups rather than others and forge political alliances with them. The main aim of this strategy is political: to deploy the support of these groups as a means of legitimizing the regime's rule in a religious sense, and/or to delegitimize its rivals. The tactic has also been instrumental in undermining rival Islamist groups that pose any real challenge to the state's leadership, and in side-lining, or even

gaining the reluctant support of, other political groups that fear the rise of political Islam in their societies (Manea 2011a: 109).

2 Corruption. Salah's regime encouraged corruption as a means of controlling those included within the system. According to Sarah Phillips (2011: 61), 'Saleh was explicit in his distrust of people who "did not steal"'; and he 'kept relatively reliable records of the corrupt activities of influential elites', which were used as 'a way of "putting a knee into the backs" of those who were disloyal to him through the threat of prosecution.'

Clearly, then, the politics of survival have meant that the state's resources were often not directed towards the country's development and its population's well-being. It has also meant that mismanagement and waste of those resources were a natural outcome.

Third feature: A state that is constantly engaged in the politics of blackmail

By the politics of blackmail I refer to the Yemeni cunning state's constant exploitation of its perceived imminent failure or collapse to avoid real reform of the system and to continue the core elites' grip on power. It has entailed a constant engagement in what Phillips correctly described as the politics of permanent crisis and it has two dimensions, local and international.

The local dimension entails a 'promise of relative stability within a heavily armed society and of being the provider of "safe" and gradual processes of political and social change' (Phillips 2011: 56). State collapse has often been used as a threatening monster that will be unleashed from its cage if, and only if, the regime of the cunning state ends. Saleh's speech after winning the 2006 presidential elections illuminates this strategy:

> The People of Yemen said 'yes' to security and stability ... Which is better, Saddam Hussein's dictatorship or today's democracy in Iraq where massacres happen every day? ... which is better, the dictatorship of Mohammed [Siyaad] Barre or the situation in Somalia now?
>
> *(Quoted in Phillips 2011: 56)*

The international dimensions entail exerting pressure on the seams of regional and international structures. The Yemeni foreign policy realm was and still is the area where the Yemeni leadership has been able to manoeuvre and strengthen its position vis-à-vis regional and international actors. During the Cold War, the leadership of North Yemen used this method by exploiting the superpower rivalry: every time it felt humiliated or mistreated by Saudi Arabia or the US it turned to the Soviet Union! It has also used it since Yemen's unification in 1990 and after the civil war in 1994. The method is hardly new. Many developing states have chosen this strategy to counter their weakness within the international community (Manea 2005: 118–123). However, a particular feature of the Yemeni cunning state's foreign policy is its growing ability to hold hostage its regional and international allies. It has used two tools in this strategy: the international war on terrorism and the international fear of the state's imminent collapse.

The first tool relates to the role Yemen has played since 2001 in the US war against terrorism. Isa Blumi (2011: 143) correctly asserts in his book *Chaos in Yemen* that in the context of the 'global war on terror, Yemen's status as a "frontline" state has given the regime a strategic option that simply expands instability in order to reiterate the fundamental value of the regime to this larger concern of the United States and its allies'.

In fact, the regime has often deliberately expanded instability – and I am not alone in holding this opinion. Experience has taught Saleh and his regime that 'foreign governments will offer more money with fewer strings attached if the threat posed by Yemeni militancy is credible' (Phillips 2011: 139). Naturally, the 'credibility' of the threat has often been produced by Saleh's regime itself. Examples are plentiful: they start with pardoning known terrorists, releasing al-Qaeda suspects from prison, and allowing Islamist militants to 'escape' from prison, and extend to utilizing 'Islamist threats' in the southern regions.

The second tool relates to the fear of regional and international actors that the Yemeni state will collapse at any moment. This fear is understandable given Yemen's close proximity to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States and its control over Bab al-Mandab, where an estimated 3.3 million barrels of oil pass by every day. Chaos in Yemen would also provide a safe haven in the Arabian Peninsula for al-Qaeda, which already has a presence in Yemen and is intent on destabilizing the Gulf regimes.

The potential failure of the Yemeni state is not exaggerated. In 2011 the country was ranked 13th among countries most at risk of failure (Failed State Index). In fact, applying the Failed State indicators reveals that the state is, indeed, failing its citizens: it is incapable of delivering public goods and unable to exercise control over the legitimate use of force in its own territory.

Interestingly, though, Yemen's core elites were not alarmed by their country's rating on the index. It simply states what has always been obvious to them. What they have done, though, was masterfully manipulate this sense of alarm among Western governments to get more financial aid and military assistance. They used that aid for their politics of survival and rarely employed it to tackle the social grievances of their population or to combat terrorism.[4] This strategy of blackmail proved very useful when the youth revolts broke out in February 2011.

Conclusion: Outsmarting the cunning state?

It was within this context of Yemen's cunning state that the youth revolt took place. The politics of the cunning state have produced three zones of conflict, operating behind the backdrop of the youth uprising:

1 A power struggle between two factions of the core elites. The first faction consists of President Saleh and his son and nephews. The other represents the wing of Saleh's half-brother Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, together with Sadeq and Hamid al-Ahmar, the sheikhs of the Hashid tribal confederation. This wing was supported by the Islamist Islah party, which is headed by Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar.
2 A regional Southern movement rallying against Northern hegemony. This movement started in 2006 because of social grievances connected to the 1994 civil war between North and South Yemen. It is not homogenous and is divided between two main factions; the first calls for total separation between North and South, and the other seeks a federal system, which would allow autonomous status for South Yemen.
3 A Huthi rebellion in the northern region of Sadaa. This rebellion, which has led to several wars and the displacement of more than 200,000 persons since 2004, was an expression of a combination of social and economic grievances. It was also a reaction

to the rise and encroachments of Sunni Islamist Salafi religious teaching, supported yet again by the cunning Saleh state.

The youth uprising became a stage upon which all these conflicts could play out. The Huthi and Southern movements joined the youths in their sit-in strikes and the calls on Saleh to step down. In this uprising both movements saw a chance to air their own regional grievances.

But, in fact, it was the support of the second wing of the cunning state's core elites that ultimately changed the nature of the youth uprising. That change came days after the 18 March 2011 massacre by snipers of more than 52 peaceful protesters in Taghier Square in Sana'a.

Gradually the rules of the 'revolt' started to be dictated by this wing, allied with the Islamist Islah party of the JMP. One by one, control over the squares fell into the hands of the Islah party's militia and supporters. Those who protested were beaten or defamed, or chose to move to a different square. Women who defied social norms and participated in the uprising were reminded that traditional structural inequalities still persist.[5] Not surprisingly, both the Huthi and Southern movements felt alienated by this development and left the squares.

As the nature of the uprising changed, so did its objectives and the solutions that were suggested. The aim was not a change of the regime. It became restricted to purging the Saleh faction from the regime. But the regime itself, and its cunning nature, were never placed in question.

In fact, the Gulf Initiative, issued by the Gulf Cooperation Council on 21 and 22 May 2011, clearly avoided shaking the Yemeni boat. It made it possible for Saleh to step down. But it left the power structures intact and recycled the core elites. This is evident in the provision that led to the creation of a 'national consensus government', divided on a 50:50 basis between the government (Saleh's faction) and the opposition (al-Ahmar's faction).[6]

Real reforms were avoided for many reasons. Chief among them was the international community's fear that such reforms would lead to the 'state's collapse'!

Fear of 'rocking the boat' has been also evident in the manner by which the national dialogue has been so far conducted. The national dialogue conference – a corner stone of the Gulf Initiative – started on June 2013 and concluded on January 2014. Its purpose has been to address and resolve in an inclusive manner core Yemeni conflicts (among others: Southern issue, Saada issue, national reconciliation and transitional justice, the form of the new state, good governance, role of the army and security apparatus, etc.) (Technical Committee for the Preparation of the National Dialogue Conference December 2012: 12–13).

The Gulf Initiative did create a framework for peace through the NDC. The conference provided a political participation platform for groups including women, youth and new political parties, which were often excluded from the informal elite power-sharing agreement. This was imperative given the alienation many youth and civil activists experienced because of the lack of transparency and elitist manner through which the Gulf Initiative was reached (Hill et al 2013: 14; Manea 2011b). The importance of a sense of empowerment among these groups should not be underestimated. Yet the limits of what the NDC could achieve were clear to many. Put simply, the problem remains that what has been done and discussed within the halls of the conference was removed from a reality dominated by cunning state logic and a shaky power equation between old rivals.

Arwa Othman, the head of the Rights and Freedom Committee within the conference, explains it in clear terms:

> The same powers (tribal/religious/military) are taking part in the dialogue; you find them sitting together on the same table and discuss with smiles and blessings. But outside (the conference) their hands are on their guns' trigger. And that is why, every time we come with serious decisions, and the decisive hour (of implementation) approaches, obstruction starts, and the smiles turn into a waving (threatening) with the streets stick.
>
> *(Arwa Othman, pers comm, 23 October 2013)*

This context reflected on the transitional justice process that took place during the last months. Abdul Karim al-Khaiwani, a member of the transitional justice team in the NDC who has conducted research on human rights violations and was himself imprisoned and tortured, captured the essence of this process:

> The basics of a transitional justice process require a transitional situation and that those who committed human rights violations step down from their positions of power. Both are absent in Yemen. We do not have a transitional situation and the perpetrators are still holding positions of authority and the parties that committed violations are in power.
>
> *(Interview with the author, Sana'a, 12 November 2013)*

The logic of the cunning state seems to have won the upper hand and the youth were left with a bitter sense of betrayal. Pushing Saleh to 'leave' was easy, as it turned out. But outsmarting the cunning state was not only difficult. It was impossible.

Notes

1 The bicameral electoral system consists of two parts: (a) 301 members of the House of Representatives (*Majlis Annowab*), elected by plurality vote in single-member constituencies to serve six-year terms; and (b) the 111 members of the Shura Council (*Majlis Alshoora*), who are appointed by the president. For an account of how Yemeni voters exercised their rights in the 2003 elections, see Carapico (2003).
2 On the formation of Arab states, see Anderson (1987).
3 This discussion of the Yemeni power structure is adapted from Manea (2011a: 95–101).
4 For more on how the language of failed states obscures the way in which 'regime incentives to build state institutions can be incompatible with regime incentives to survive', see Wedeen (2010: 2).
5 Arwar Othman, a pioneer activist who objected to the Islamists segregating males and females on 16 April 2011, is one famous example. Because she insisted on participating on an equal footing without discrimination based on her gender, she and 18 of her male and female colleagues were beaten. The attack has drawn sharp criticism and condemnation from many political and civil actors in Yemen.
6 For a critique of the Gulf Initiative, see Manea (2011b).

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